

Residents to map out neighbourhood needs

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Parks, recreation centres, childcare facilities, libraries and transit are what planners and most Vancouverites typically consider community amenities. But two local planning groups want to hear what else we treasure about our neighbourhoods.

This weekend, residents of Douglas Park, near Cambie and King Edward, can have their say in a second session of YouMap Vancouver—an attempt to find out what else neighbourhood residents would put on the map.

More than 50 participants in a two-day festival of workshops earlier this month in Grandview-Woodland identified a community garden, free tennis courts, independently owned coffee shops, delis and specialty shops as important to their neighbourhood. But the diverse mix of participants, which included children, seniors and aboriginal residents, also said the area lacks clearly marked pedestrian crossings and affordable housing, said Kristi Tatebe, a planner with Smart Growth Advisory Services, a project of the non-profit group Smart Growth B.C., which provides consulting services to municipal and regional governments.

After two years of intense public attention on community planning related to the city's EcoDensity initiative, Bob Ransford thought residents needed to highlight assets and gaps in their communities to help the city better plan for changes including food and energy scarcity, climate change and increased density.

"Everybody says if you're going to bring in density, you'd better provide amenities, and I think we all took for granted that amenities meant those things that we normally think about: parks, swimming pools, recreation centres and that kind of thing," said Ransford, a commissioner on the Vancouver City Planning Commission, the volunteer body appointed by city council to provide advice on long-term planning. He's also a director on the board of Smart Growth, which focuses on financially, socially and environmentally responsible land use and development.

The two groups launched YouMap Vancouver as a first-time collaboration and were surprised that traditional amenities did not rate highly. "But when the people [in Grandview-Woodland] defined what was missing from their neighbourhood, they hardly talked about those things. They talked about more diverse retail, more locally owned retail, more supportive local economic development, more civic gathering spaces on the street, that kind of thing," Ransford said.

The city can't control market forces, but it does have tools to allow for more small, independently owned businesses, according to Tatebe.

"In certain places like UniverCity [housing development and community], for example, up at SFU, they've got policies that favour local businesses, so they won't allow chains in and that sort of thing," Tatebe said.

The Planning Commission and Smart Growth chose Grandview-Woodland and Douglas Park to reach citizens from different demographic and geographic areas.

All residents and community groups of the Douglas Park area are welcome to attend two days of events where they'll talk with their neighbours and facilitators about topics including their favourite places to relax, the kind of housing they like, transportation and sustainability.

Both sessions will run from a storefront at 3408 Cambie St., and community-sponsored door prizes will be given out. Friday's session runs from 5 to 7 p.m., with a citizen-led tour through the neighbourhood to document favourite spots at 5:30. Saturday's session runs from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Those unable to attend can add their views online at www.youmapvancouver.ca.

The Vancouver City Planning Commission will report to city council on YouMap. The report will evaluate the YouMap consultations to see if the model can be applied to other neighbourhoods. Summary reports will also be given to local residents' associations and community groups.